

Policy Implications and Reflections

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Thank you. I always begin by telling people that I have lived one third of my life in Scotland, one third in Canada and the rest in Australia- so you don't spend the rest of my speech trying to work out where my accent comes from.

I appreciate this opportunity to address the issues that we heard yesterday from the point of view of a practitioner- someone who is in the field and who works in an organisation that works across Australia with young adults from 15 year olds onwards. I am on the ground and see things from a non academic perspective and after listening to yesterday's presentations I redid what I was going to say because I felt already a number of the policy issues have been drawn out. I cannot but agree with the suggestions that the papers have already highlighted as policies that need to be further explored and considered. But I do want to add another dimension so that when policy is considered it is considered from a number of perspectives.

My initial reaction when I read these papers and knowing the material from last year's forum, is to ask the question: if we know so much, why do we do so little? It seems to me that the data that we have at this point is more than enough to develop policy and programs for young adults. But to assure some outcome from the data and information that we have it needs not only to be a political priority, it also needs to be a community priority. What is important now is how we can use the information that we received yesterday and turn it into practical outcomes that will make a difference to the lives of young Australians.

One of the wonderful things about working in an organisation like the YWCA is that we work with a very wide cross section of young adults, from very advantaged young women, to very disadvantaged young women. I took the opportunity to sit down with a broad range of young women and talk to them about the fact that I was coming to this forum, that we were going to be talking about learning and work, and we were going to be discussing some of the implications of what that meant for future policy development. I asked them for their insight and feedback.

It was very interesting because I got a mini version of Belinda and Fiona's paper coming back from these young women. I just didn't have as many young single mothers in my sample as they did. My comments today are geared mostly towards those policies which

will affect young adults who have their foot on the downward escalator rather than the upward one, although many will have implications for both.

I'm not naive enough to believe we can create an entirely equal or level playing field, but I do think we need to do some very active policy and program plans towards removing some of the hurdles that face many of the young disadvantaged people today.

One of the first things that the young people said to me is that it is their belief that current policies have the underlying assumption that they have family and parents who are supporting them. I thought Meredith's comment yesterday about the need to do research as to how much do families actually support this particular age group was a pertinent one. Many of the young people that we are in contact with, starting with a much earlier age group than the one we are discussing, do not have the kind of family support and backup that we often assume.

Policy needs to be developed ensuring that we are talking about young adults - we are not talking about people who are appendages to family units - many of them are not. Even in the younger age group you get people who are severely disadvantaged by what we still call 'free education' which is not free really at all. We had one girl come in and ask if we would pay her 'voluntary' school fees at one of the local high schools. We said surely this school has a policy to let someone in your circumstances not pay the fees, but she said 'don't do me in for not being able to afford them, and don't do me in for coming to ask you for assistance'. She really felt quite discriminated against in the school that she attended. Some young people face that sort of hurdle from a very early age because they don't have the family support and background to shore them up.

The second thing that the young women and those who work with them said and was reiterated by a number of speakers yesterday and that is the need for a variety of educational opportunities for those who are in this particular age group. The problem with mainstreaming is that if you are not mainstream you are in difficulty. So we really do need some kind of creative constructive ways to help young people who are not fitting into the current system. Many of the young people who we would work with are non-conformist, creative and very bright and I do not want to have to force them to conform to a mainstream mould. I think we need to develop a range of educational opportunities that allow them to pursue some of their differences so that their experiences might positively contribute to the building of our society.

I also agree with the fact that we need to do much more in the preventative stage. We have very clear evidence that if you intervene early in the lives of young people that their lives can be changed. Yet we don't have any across the board imperative that helps develop, implement and evaluate programs in this area.

There is also the need for what Meredith talked about in her summary yesterday - individual attention for young people who need assistance to plan their futures, particularly those from the disadvantaged group. However I would say that this only works in my experience if there are wider policy frameworks in place that also support the employment policy and program framework that we are discussing. I was talking to

someone yesterday and they said that one of the interesting outcomes of the Prime Minister's Homelessness Taskgroup is that departments here in Canberra have actually talked to each other about programs in their departments that affect young people. Integration and connection of policy and programs across the board is something which I think is essential and must continue to happen.

When I speak with young people and workers of young people who work in the employment field and say to them: what is the difference between a young person getting a job and not getting a job? They say four things are key, and five if you are a single mother.

1) The first is in our experience is that in order to get employment, stay in employment and/or to take a course of study, young people must have stable, affordable housing. That is the key difference between success and failure in the employment programs we do. If young people don't have such housing options or other successful housing behind them, their ability to enter the job market or study and stay in it successfully is severely limited.

2) The second one is the development of personal life skills. While it is all very well to have passed year 12 or even to have succeed at university, if you don't have personal life skills then you are usually passed over in the job market for someone who has.

I had an Human Resource person who came to me and said, "you know if you are interviewing four people for a job, no matter at which level it is at - qualifications being equal, you give the job to the person who has the best interactive and interpersonal skills. You don't give the job to the person who can't make eye contact with you, who doesn't know how to shake your hand, who mumbles, or who looks down all the time."

It is these skills we must teach our young people to make them successful in the job market. Many of them don't have personal life skills, they have vast self esteem problems, there are anger management issues with young men, so there is a whole range of personal life skill development that needs to be also part of the employment strategy.

3) The third aspect is that many young adult, particularly disadvantaged young adults have no networks that assist them find jobs. The old adage 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' still holds true when it comes to getting a job. Many of these young people come from backgrounds where they have no networks, and that is where organisations like the YWCA, Anglicare and others can provide wonderful networks because we have built them up over a number of years on behalf of young people. My plea at this point to the bureaucrats is that the one year funding policy which says that this year the YWCA can run the program, but next year we will let someone else run it because their bid is a few thousand dollars cheaper is false economy. It results in rendering useless all the networks and the hard work put into developing relationships with employers in the community to make it possible for us to open doors and opportunities for young people.

4) The fourth issue is the health issue. This isn't quite as major, but amongst some of the disadvantaged issues of substance abuse, anorexia, self mutilation, depression and while I know it was pointed out yesterday that young men have a higher suicide rate than young women, that is because they are more successful. Young women actually attempt suicide at a greater rate than young men. They just don't use guns to do it and are consequently less successful. So there are a number of issues of a health nature that need to be addressed in looking at policy around employment and learning.

5) The final one relates to young mothers; for them the issue of childcare is highly significant. Affordable childcare and childcare that is non judgemental, --that doesn't say to them that they have made the wrong decision by having this child at such a young age but accepts the decision and choice that has been made, and helps them pick up from there and move forward is essential for them to re-enter the workforce or study.

Another area where young people were highly critical in their comments was of careers advice. They feel that they are being not told the truth. They feel that we know where there are jobs, that is in which industries and where the job market is heading in the future, but we are not telling them the entire truth. They feel there should be more advice about the need for science and technologies skills, for trades people, for skills other than just a university degree. I told the story at dinner last night about what one young woman who had been working for two years in child care, she said to me: "Why didn't they tell me I'd make more money as a plumber? And there's more job opportunities and it's more flexible? There can't be any more shit in plumbing than there is in childcare."

Young women do feel that they are forced into very traditional occupations: not forced, but that their eyes are not opened in one sense to the options that they might have in that whole field of employment. I think there is a whole range of issues around career development from high school right through to university. University students saying just because we have a degree doesn't always mean we know what we want to do with our lives.

Another question that must be asked is whether in this discussion we are going to take seriously the whole task of job creation and whether that is an option that will be considered in the employment equation. Particularly when we look at rural and isolated areas, job creation may be one of the only options open to us.

We run a JPET (Jobs Placement Employment Training) program for young women in Melbourne and a number of other places around the country. We applied to do it in Wonthaggi which is in East Gippsland for those of you who are not Victorian. The Government said there is no point in doing one there because there are no jobs to place young people into. So what we are saying to the young people in that area if you want to work you must move to the city or to somewhere there are jobs because there are not going to be jobs in your area.

I think in Melbourne the Jayden Leski murder trial has just highlighted the social consequences and the social cost of the loss of jobs for young people in the La Trobe valley. Surely in areas such as that job creation programs must not only be socially effective, but economically effective as well.

Young women across the board are saying that they do not want to have to choose between motherhood and career. They want a system of work which takes seriously family responsibility. While young women articulate this more clearly, there are also a significant numbers of young men who are also saying they don't want to give up everything in life in order to be successful in work.

I think there is a lot of work that industry and management needs to do around the practices of family friendly workplaces to enable young people to have the responsibility of parenting and working at the same time.

I read with interest the paper that was speaking about the dissatisfaction of young adults with both union and management and this reflection will lead me into my concluding remarks. Young people expressed in the paper dissatisfaction with management, particularly the fact that they were not consulted or felt they were not given enough opportunity for participation. At the same time they also expressed a support for unions but this did not translate into membership of unions. I think that has to do with the fact that we are talking here about a new generation of young adults. I think the paternalistic response or top down approach that has worked in the past for unions in which unions did things on behalf of workers is not what young adults of today are looking for. They are looking for a style of operation whereby they can work collaboratively with unions to help change things for themselves, so it is no longer you do this for us and we will belong, but rather let's work together on the issue.

I think that that is true also in management. Young people are looking for a way in which they are more actively participating in the system. I say this because of the experience of my own organisation. Traditionally the YWCA has been an organisation in which older, experienced and wealthier women have done what they believed was good for young women. The result was that by the 1990's we had lost touch with the current generation of young women.

In the last seven years we have tried to change the focus of the organisation to one of listening to what young adults and young women are saying about their own situation, and empowering them to take the necessary action to change that situation into what it is they need and want. It involves them in speaking out on their own behalf about what it is that they believe is necessary for them in the future.

I think a criticism I have about the last two days is that we have been talking about young adults, and I believe we should be talking with young adults. My experience is that they are highly articulate, they know what their problems are and they have a fair idea about

what the solutions could be. They should be involved in any policy development that involves what is going to happen to the future of work and learning for them. They are very clear from the very disadvantaged to the most advantaged about what is wrong with the current system and what changes need to be made to make it work. It would be my ardent hope that one of the next steps of the Dusseldorf Skills Forum would be to actually consult with young adults, and that no policy either from government or any other institution be developed without consultation with young adults. People say that young adults are our future, but young adults are also our present and that needs to be acknowledged. Thank you.